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Etsè Awitor

AIC
nr. 12
2/2013

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Through the analysis of Dusman Gonzaga's revolt against the exploitation institutionalized by the "faceless ones"[1] who rule their society in *The Cockroach Dance* (1979), this essay examines the quest that underpins his revolt. Not being satisfied with his living conditions in a squalid tenement building called Dacca House which he shares with other tenants, Dusman Gonzaga stands up to ask why they wallow in misery while the others find gorgeous ways and means to exploit them and live in abundance. This essay, therefore, points out the inhuman conditions in which the tenants of Dacca House live, and through them the case of the "wretched of the earth", the dejected, the perpetual victims of the selfishness and the arrogance of the "Lords" of their society. Through Dusman's quest and revolt, the dissonance and the exploitation that become the rules of his society are voiced.

Keywords: quests; conquests; revolt; social justice; exploitation; violence; poverty.

Dusman, the protagonist of Meja Mwangi's[i] *The Cockroach Dance* (1979), is a meter reader and parking meter attendant. He lives in an insalubrious building owned by an unscrupulous landlord Tumbo Kubwa (literally means Big Belly). He shares his room with his friend Toto, an employee at the Commercial Bank. After his "wrongful and unlawful dismissal" (16) at Sunshine Hotel where he was a room attendant, Dusman comes to live in Dacca House where he meets strange characters like the Bathroom Man, Chupa na Debe (the merchant of trash), Mganga (the witch doctor), Magendo (the racketeer), Sukuma Wiki (the rugged vegetable peddler) and his wife Vuta Wiki who are "fully engaged in the helpless process of existing" and eke out a living through "trivial do-it-yourself projects". Apart from the tenants mentioned above, seventy-five percent of the inhabitants of Dacca House are labelled the "silent faceless ones" (128). The term "silent faceless ones"

"Was a reference term Dusman's roommate, Toto, had coined to encompass the seventy-five per cent of the inhabitants of Dacca House of whom very little or nothing at all was known. These were the ordinary folks who lived ordinary lives, had no distinguishing marks by way of character, appearance or profession and would probably die without any. Few of them had names, faces or voices one would remember even vaguely twenty-four hours later. Dusman did not see them in Dacca House for weeks on end, although he was all the time aware of life around him in the form of a soft cough or a loud breaking of wind out in the yard. He detested them for this, their being

[1]The "faceless ones" are the politicians, leaders and unscrupulous businessmen who exploit the misery of their countrymen. These people monopolize the riches of their country at the expense of the majority who wallows in poverty and lives in subhuman conditions.

[i]Meja Mwangi belongs to the second generation of African writers. He was born in Nanyuki, Kenya, in 1948. As a prolific writer, he has published more than twenty novels, plays, short stories and screenplays. He has received the Jomo Kenyatta prize for literature in 1974, 1976 and 2001 for his novels *Kill Me Quick* (1973), *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *The Last Plague* (2000). For more information, look at his home page: http://www.mejamwangi.com/index.html or http://literature.britishcouncil.org/meja-mwangi.

present and absent at the same time, real but unreal, alive but dead." (128)

Considered as a "den for criminals" (366) or a "heap of human dung" (250), Dacca House is owned by a "tyrannical landlord" (269) who does not hesitate to exploit the misery of the poor people. When Tumbo Kubwa buys Dacca House from Kachra Samat, it has only fifteen rooms. Then with a genius businessman's flair, Tumbo Kubwa turns it into a money-making machine. From the old Dacca House, the landlord succeeds in making thirty single rooms:

"By the time the gang of builders has finished their rigorous job, the old fifteen-room Dacca House had now thirty single rooms, including the two kitchens and bathroom, one toilet, a shower room and water faucet. Each room was just slightly larger than a giant packing crate, completely independent of the others, but they all shared the one toilet and one shower. Apart from these necessary alterations nothing else was touched. The dirty peeling paint remained dirty and peeling, the leaking roof stayed leaking, and any windows that had not been fortunate enough to have window panes stayed without window panes." (84)

The rooms are so small that the Bathroom Man, for example, is obliged to cut the legs of his bed and squeeze it into the room. Apart from the bed, there is no room or place for anything else. Moreover, the room does not have adequate ventilation system or window: "[t]he only ventilation was the original fine grille above the bathroom door" (158). It is worth stressing that the name "the Bathroom Man" stems from the fact that he lives in a bathroom. Since he rents a bathroom and moves in with his family, he acquires a new personality and a new name. Nobody dares to ask him his real name. Also, his wife is simply called the Bathroom Man's wife. The Bathroom Man and his family (the Bathroom Man's wife and their "mentally-handicapped" child) do everything outside, in the yard. They cook and eat near the blocked toilet that stinks. The wife often goes to stay in a public park all day long waiting for his husband to finish his work as an open garage mechanic to come home together and cook their only daily meal.

Also, the room of another tenant, Chupa na Debe, looks like a garbage dump as far as his tiny room is used as his workshop and his sleeping room. The room is full of empty bottles and old retrieved materials from which he earns his living. "The room was like a miniature private garbage dump, and smelt somewhere between a clinic, a garage, a beer hall and a real garbage dump" (214). The name Chupa na Debe literally means "bottles and cans". His name derives from his work as a seller of empty bottles, cans and retrieved materials found in dust bins. For the significance of the characters' names in the novel, see, for instance, Kurtz (1998: 130). According to Dusman and Toto, the room for which they pay three hundred shillings is not different from a "'dog-house"' (307).

Apart from these stifling and suffocating conditions of the rooms due to lack of space and ventilation, most of the rooms need to be repainted and the roofs repaired to prevent moisture because the "'walls [are] cracked, floors worn, roof leaking…"' (307). But what is the most disgusting and revolting is the poor living conditions of Dacca House epitomized by lack of adequate sanitary conditions. In fact, the environment of Dacca House is replete with filth, stench, and odor of the blocked toilet shared by over forty tenants and the shower room which resembles to a "pit latrine". The overflowing garbage bins which spread in the yard become the feeding place of all sorts of animals. Hence, it is not surprising that the rooms and the yard are literally invaded by the rats, mice and cockroaches:

"As he [Dusman] hauled himself up the precariously inclined stairs, he could make out distinctly the choking smell of the blocked toilets above the stench of the overflowing trash cans. The toilet, which, like the cold shower, was shared by forty tenants, had been blocked for a week. The stink was progressing to an epidemic level and spreading into the living rooms. The garbage cans were breeding bigger, healthier, more voracious families of rats and roaches. Nothing was done about them either. That very morning, Dusman had found a giant rat drowned in the toilet bowl, an old-fashioned floor-level horseshoe, probably drowned reaching down for food. It looked swollen and ugly, floating upside down with tiny pink legs up. […] One of these fine days, the landlord would have to fish

his rent money out of the overflowing toilet." (105-106)

In this passage, the narrator points out the bad living conditions of the tenants and the predatory spirit or instinct of the "slum landlord" Kumbo Tubwa. He does not want to spend money to repair the toilet and the shower, and yet he is eager to claim his rent. Due to a complete lack of rents regulation and insufficient accommodations facilities, the landlords increase the rents when they want. They know very well that whatever the price, and whatever the living conditions may be, they will find tenants because "there were hundreds of homeless […] who did not mind cooking, eating and sleeping in the same cell, and sharing the stale shower and blocked toilet with their brothers" (153).

Meja Mwangi does not only use stale shower, blocked toilet, odor and filth to describe and single out the poverty and the misery of the dejected, but also the laxness and the failure of the post-independence leaders in Kenya to live up to post-independence expectations of their fellow countrymen. Instead of a real change, the new bourgeoisie replaces the former colonialists. According to Frantz Fanon, "[t]he national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement: doctors, barristers, traders, commercial travellers, general agents, and transport agents. […] Its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism" (152).

More than anything else, Dacca House is located in a poor quarter named Grogan Road. "Everyone knew it was a rotten neighbourhood, the sewage smelled all night and all day, and everybody was either a mugger or a victim on Grogan Road" (183). There is no doubt that in this environment gnawed by the "possession-mania", someone has stolen the wheels, the headlights and the windows of Dusman's car. Seeing his mutilated car, Dusman understands the helplessness of his situation and the despair it implies. He is now convinced that his car will never move again and his future is highly forfeited because "she [the car] was his whole past, the only past he remembered without regret. […] But most of all it was his ticket out of Dacca House. As long as she was there he knew he would one day live. He had come to Dacca House in the old Triumph, and that was the way he would leave. To give her up would be like selling not only his past, but the promise of a better future as well" (8).

It is in this polluted environment that the characters of this novel live. But, far from being considered as a mere victim and then resigned to his fate, Dusman stands up to ask Tumbo Kubwa to reduce the rent, repair the blocked toilets and organize a trash collection. In short, as Dusman puts it, "this is a perfect justified, reasonable request for action, and even the rent tribunal will agree with that. All we are asking for is a fair deal and humane living conditions" (270). Do the other tenants support Dusman in his quests? Does Tumbo Kubwa understand Dusman's legitimate quests?

Throughout the novel, Dusman repeatedly asks himself why the inhabitants of Dacca House and Grogan Road live in these downtrodden conditions and nobody seems to care. Why do they suffer in silence at the mercy of the "raving money-mad" Tumbo Kubwa? Why does the landlord through an inhuman system exploit the misery of the tenants? Why does the minority find gorgeous means to enjoy the fruit of independence while the majority of people wallow in "shit?" Tumbo Kubwa can afford to buy Dacca House because of his connections within the system. "Using his numerous connections, he borrowed loans from the banks and other financial institutions and acquired himself several properties" (151-152).

The exploitation of the tenants of Dacca House and especially the sub-human conditions in which the Bathroom Man lives has forced Dusman to act and voice their plight. He wonders "'[w]hy should a human being live in a dank bathroom and pay for it? I mean, why do they let it happen?'" (131). And "'… for heaven's sake, [Dusman asks to] clean up Dacca House and get the man out of the bathroom'" (198). According to Dusman, the Bathroom Man has "betrayed his masculinity, his very manhood by bringing his faithful wife and baby to live in a bathroom by

the trash cans" (162). Moreover, as far as the landlord does not consult them before increasing the rents, Dusman wants to mobilize the tenants of Dacca House as well as the "silent faceless ones" to take part in a "rent strike" campaign against Tumbo Kubwa to oblige him to reduce the rents or get the rents controlled. Hence, Dusman suggests that they "'talk to the man, hold a big serious meeting with him. Force him to reduce the rents, patch up the place, get the sewage moving, catch the mice and generally make the place hygienic enough to live in. If we all go together and boycotted the rents he would have no choice but to listen to us"' (161).

In order to carry out his plot, he undertakes to write what he calls "Dacca House Manifesto" which will be addressed to the landlord and copied to the city Council and to the rent tribunal. In so doing, he thinks to raise awareness of the authorities as far as the plight of the tenants of Dacca House is concerned and beyond that the plight of all those who are suffering in the hands of tyrannical landlords: "[s]uch a report should have been intensive enough to be copied to the higher housing authorities so that they might look into the plight of the hundreds of others like him who were left at the mercy of bloodless exploiters and money-makers like Tumbo Kubwa" (143).

He is quite aware that his quest for social justice will not be an easy task because Tumbo Kubwa will not fold his arms and look without fighting back. "The road to justice was rough and long. Tumbo Kubwa would fight back with all the weapons at his disposal. He would call down the wrath of the gods upon the defiant tenants, and he might even cry 'politics' to gain sympathy from the mightier" (264). However, as Dusman concedes, "[t]here is no progressive venture that does not involve a certain amount of danger" (319) and "someone has to do something sometimes" (217) to alleviate his burden and in so doing, "stand up and fight for [his] rights" (257) because "there comes a time when a man has to make a decision to take action" (270).

One early morning, Dusman takes action to draft the petition of the "Dacca House Manifesto". He mentions all the problems facing the tenants, namely the lack of ventilation in the rooms, the peeling walls, the leaking roofs because "none of the rooms had been repainted in the last fifteen years and the roof over many of them leaked during the rainy seasons" (263). In his manifesto, he also points out the blocked toilet and the stale cold shower. But, the "bone of contention, the largest, was the rent" (264). In general, Dusman "outlined at length the general decrepit condition of Dacca House and made a sincere appeal to the rent tribunal and to Tumbo Kubwa's sense of fair play to review the rents and repair the property" (264). After his draft and the compiling list of signatories, the most difficult task is to convince the tenants to sign the petition.

Dusman starts with the first tenants who he thinks may be favorable with his project, namely the Bathroom Man, Magendo, the racketeer, and Toto, his roommate. Dusman is surprised by the negative reactions from the tenants. Magendo sarcastically called the rent boy campaign, "the coup de house" and qualifies the project as a "fantastic nonsense". According to Toto, Dusman's project "is the craziest idea I have ever heard" (307) and he calls his friend a "reform fanatic". The Bathroom Man, afraid of the outcomes of the campaign, refuses point blank to sign the petition.

Dusman, after pondering over the behaviour and the reactions of the tenants, cannot understand "how could people be so myopic? How could they be so blind to the blatant exploitation by Tumbo Kubwa that had them living in sewers and bathrooms!" (220). He concludes in a sad and pathetic mood that "there were no human beings in Dacca House. Only mice and cockroaches and zombies" (211). It is worth stressing that the cockroaches, in the novel, are the metaphor of the dejected, the marginalized and the powerless people of Nairobi slums. Like most lonely social reformers in literature, Dusman is considered by the tenants and the landlord as "mad", "crazy", "nut" or "insane". He becomes an isolated and alienated character because he dares to go against the preordained or established system. His situation parallels the one of Okolo in Gabriel Okara's The Voice (1964), or Baako in Ayi Kwei Armah's Fragments (1969).

Notwithstanding, Dusman does not give up the fight and he is ready to continue the

"peaceful and orderly demonstration against one tyrannical landlord" (269). One morning, when Tumbo Kubwa comes to fetch his rents after his Christian revival meetings, Dusman does not hesitate to confront the "slum landlord" and tell him how he is cheating and exploiting them, and how decrepit the building is:

"'You cheat us a lot, you know, and that could put you into a lot of trouble with the law. These hovels are not worth what you make us pay for them. And charging the man for living in a bathroom is worse than murder. What would the health inspector think if they knew you had a tenant in a bathroom? A bloody bathroom! They would lynch you, you know.'[…]

'No one should live in a bathroom even for free,' Dusman told him quietly.

'You…you are mad,' Tumbo Kubwa stuttered. '

You are out of your mind.'

'Mad!' Dusman's voice rose in fury. 'For saying no one should live in a box? You are the one that is insane. You are raving money mad.' 'I don't …' the landlord cleared his throat, 'don't want trouble-makers on my premises. If you don't.. don't like it here, get… out!'" (164-165)

The dialogue between the two men and the reaction of Tumbo Kubwa denote the blindness of the landlord, his denial and his refusal to consider the claims of Dusman. In short, he denies the rights of the poor to access to justice. "He denied Dusman a chance to tell him how many hundreds of horrifying diseases his cousin's retarded child could catch living in a bathroom and eating outside a flooded lavatory.[…] Instead he snorted and bulldozed out of the grey-walled room, his chubby body trembling with rage, insulted to the core of his righteousness" (165). Stunned by the reaction of Tumbo Kubwa, Dusman cannot but ask the questions which are at the core of his quests:

'Where the hell was justice in life, where was God? On whose side was He, the slum landlord's or the tenant's. All the time Tumbo Kubwa claimed that he was doing God's work by alleviating the countrywide housing problem. If providing condemned dwellings was truly His work, then maybe he was doing God's work. But what about the overflowing garbage and cans and the blocked toilet? How about them? Whose responsibility was it? What did He make of trash bins too small to hold trash and latrines that stayed blocked all year round? […] And the Bathroom Man, whose responsibility was he?" (165-166)

Through the passage quoted above, the narrator singles out the dichotomy and the contrast between Tumbo Kubwa's faith as a "God-fearing man", his spiritual sterility and his relation or conception about materialism and wealth. More than anything else, he does not want to hear about justice and he threats Dusman to throw him out of Dacca House if he continues his quest: "if I hear you have been stirring up trouble in my premises I will throw you out of this room, you and your justice!" (376).

Despite the threat, Dusman does not deflect from his quest. His questioning spirit echoes throughout the novel. Therefore, his quest is a potential threat to the established system epitomized by Tumbo Kubwa. No wonder that Tumbo Kubwa wants to silence him. Dusman's situation is reminiscent of Okolo's in Gabriel Okara's The Voice. For example, in The Voice, the Elders who rule the fictional country of Sologa want to stop Okolo in his search for social justice and moral righteousness in an environment polluted by corruption and graft: "No he must stop his search. He must not spoil their pleasure" (24). The resistance of Dusman against the system till the end without flinching is a sign of hope and awareness, and that sooner or later his message may yield fruits and other people may follow his path. "Nobody stands the power of the spoken word. Okolo has spoken. I will speak when the time is correct and others will follow and our spoken words will gather power like the power of hurricane and Izongo [the Chief] will sway and fall like a sugar cane" (94). Without doubt, "[t]he fight for the lower rents would take place exactly as scheduled. Let Tumbo Kubwa bring out all the riot police in the world" (383). This last

paragraph of the novel echoes the rallying cry of freedom fighters movement during Mozambique's war for independence: "A luta continua", "The struggle continues".

The analysis of Meja Mwangi's novel The Cockroach Dance (1979) bluntly reveals the abject exploitation of the majority by the privileged few. Life becomes a real drama in the poorest slums like Grogan Road in Nairobi "and the events that take place daily […] leave you with a dry acid taste in your mouth. Real life dramas, written by an eccentric old bastard. […] Each passing day Dusman saw the people re-enact the tragedy by being, and witnessed them suffer and breed to death on the parched streets at the merciless hands of their laughing fellow countrymen" (43). The system hinders any efforts to allow the majority to fulfill their dreams. Tumbo Kubwa who exploits the tenants of Dacca House, would like to perpetuate the system and hence safeguard his privilege.

Dusman's awareness and his denunciation of the inhuman exploitation that the tenants and the "silent faceless ones" are subject to and his eagerness to redeem the situation become a "messianic mission". It is through his eyes and the use of the omniscient narrator that most of the actions in the novel are portrayed. His revolt does not only aim to awaken the tenants and beyond them the oppressed people from their slumber, and urge them to stand up for their rights, but also force the "haves" ones to work towards more equal and egalitarian society. At the end of the novel, the Bathroom Man leaves the Bathroom and moves to another room, a room more convenient and larger than the bathroom. He finally regains his lost dignity and signs the famous "Dacca House Manifesto". Dusman's action has indeed awakened the Bathroom Man from his lethargy and for him, nothing will be the same. As he puts it: "'I realised,' he said finally, 'that a time comes when a man himself can improve his own lot'" (380).

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